

# **“Race, Connectedness and Social Capital in the United States”**

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## Abstract

Social capital theory, particularly the work of Robert Putnam, has received a great deal of scholarly and popular attention. We argue that Putnam's formulation ignores the ways in which race is fundamental and constitutive to the structure and function of social capital in the United States. We suggest an alternative framework, one that: (1) treats race as more than an independent variable; (2) addresses the structural factors underlying social capital development; and (3) includes the role of gatekeepers in the process. Such a framework would allow us to have a more accurate, and more nuanced, understanding of how social capital operates in the United States.

## Introduction

Few social scientists ever generate the attention, or controversy, that Robert Putnam has since he first made his social capital argument in 1993 (Putnam 1993). In *Making Democracy Work*, Putnam argued that political differences between northern and southern Italy could be explained by differences in political culture, particularly social capital, between the two areas. In recent work, Putnam applies this social capital model to the United States, arguing that declines in social capital went a long way towards explaining increasing voter apathy and decreasing civic engagement among Americans. This article raised a stream of controversy and political debate, much of which Putnam responded to with his book, *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000). While Putnam addresses his critics in this work, the central argument remains the same: since the mid-1960s, political trust, social connectedness and civic activity has declined precipitously in the United States, and that the root explanation is generational differences between Americans born after World War II and those born before.

There have been many criticisms of Putnam's argument, which we will not go into here (Portes 1998). In this paper, we argue that Putnam's argument ignores in important ways the role played by an issue that is, and has always been, fundamental to American civic life – race. Putnam himself acknowledges the centrality of race to American politics, but then dismisses race as an issue since he finds declines in social capital in Americans of all

racism. We argue that in this instance Putnam is treating race as an independent variable, rather than as something that is foundational and constitutive of American political and social life (Smith 2004). As a result, he misses the important role that race plays in American feelings of social connectedness and civic attachment. That, along with a general tendency to emphasize individual over structural factors, keeps Putnam from developing a model of social capital that accurately reflects the realities of American social and civic life since World War II. As such, he underestimates the historical importance of the period he is studying – the post World War II era – in terms of the significant impact it has had on race relations, and, by extension, civic life, within American communities.

### **Race, Connections and Social Capital**

Putnam defines social capital as “features of social life – networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Putnam 1995: 664). He emphasizes the connected aspects of social capital, that it refers to “social connections and the attendant norms and trust” and therefore is about our “relations with one another” and people’s “connections with the life of their communities” (Putnam 1995: 665). His argument presumes that “the more we connect with other people, the more we trust them, and vice versa” (Putnam 1995: 665). So, for Putnam, what matters are those activities that lead people to develop deeper and more meaningful relations with one another. That, then, serves as the foundation for other kinds of political activity and/or membership.

It is that relational aspect of social capital that we believe deserves further scrutiny in terms of its relationship to issues of race. Many scholars have criticized Putnam for his lack of focus on race. According to McClain (2003), “most analyses of social capital do not

confront the conditions or contingencies associated with race...and do not recognize that what might be positively related to social capital for whites may in fact be negatively related for blacks" (101). Similarly, Portney and Berry (1997) contend that "the debate about social capital and civic engagement largely concentrates on White, middle-class America" (633). Hero (2003) also argues "social capital studies...focus almost entirely on aggregate outcomes and absolute gains" (120). As such, Hero challenges Putnam's measures of social capital in that neither the social capital index nor the civic equality index are "disaggregated according to race" (113).

In response to these criticisms, Putnam (2000) acknowledges "the decline in social connectedness began just after the successes of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s" (41). He believes this may be due to "a kind of sociological 'white flight,' as legal desegregation of civic life led whites to withdraw from community associations" (41). But, he does not believe that race is an issue in social capital because "the erosion of social capital...has affected all races. In fact, during the 1980s the downturns in both joining and trusting were even greater among African Americans (and other racial minorities). So, for Putnam, race is only an issue insofar as whites leave newly integrated community associations and there are appreciable differences in social capital among the races. Since whites are not the only group with decreasing social capital, he does not believe that racial issues are a significant part of this story.

This formulation, like that of most political scientists looking at race, treats race as an independent variable (Smith 2004). In other words, it questions whether or not individuals who identify themselves as members of a particular race behave in ways that are different from those who identify themselves as being of another race. Race here serves only as a descriptor for a particular group of people. The actual dynamics attached to the race

descriptor are located outside the model, a point we return to later. For Putnam, since the decline he is measuring is present among whites and racialized groups, then race in and of itself is not an explanatory factor.

But, what if we see the construction of race, and of American social and political institutions, as fundamentally racialized? Smith (2004) points out that "American racial identities have gained much of their practical reality from their institutionalization by political elites in laws, public policies and governmental programs" (44). In addition, Smith (1997) also tells us that conceptions of U.S. citizenship, particularly, historically have been defined in ascriptive terms, terms that through most of our history excluded women and people of color. He goes on to say that many Americans "defined their core political identities in terms of their race, gender, religion, ethnicity, and culture" and "warred passionately ... against every force and faction that threatened to give the U.S. citizenry a different cast" (Smith 1997: 4). Smith calls his work a "basic reinterpretation of American political culture," one that places race at the center of American identity and civic life.

This ascriptive understanding of who was an American had important social, political and economic repercussions. Our housing markets, driven by the FHA, routinely discriminated against African American and Latino buyers, encouraging racial segregation and ensuring that new suburban developments were almost universally middle class and white (Lipsitz 1998). Our schools, north and south, were segregated by race. Higher education and professional employment were largely closed to people of color. And, many of the civic organizations Putnam mentions – Kiwanis, the Rotary Club, etc. – banned the participation of both women and people of color. If social capital is about building relationships within your community, these racially biased programs have had important effects on what that community looked like and who (racially) was allowed to live in it. It

makes intuitive sense, then, that race and race policies are intimately related to the creation and maintenance of community in the United States.

But, we do not have to rely on intuition to say that this is true. Sociologists looking at social networks have found that, even in the present day, American social networks are highly homogenous (Knoke 1990; Marsden 1987; McPherson et al. 2001). This is true in terms of race and political ideology (Knoke 1990). In a national probability sample in the 1980s, Marsden (1987) finds that only 8 percent of Americans report having significant primary-level interactions with individuals of another race. This is, of course, during a period of integration. So, what can reports of social homophily tell us? Mainly, that race still is an important factor in terms of the people with whom one can feel comfortable, and with whom one wants to spend time. It seems only logical, then, that race would affect the attachments a person feels to their community and the ways in which they want to act upon that attachment. In other words, racial customs and attitudes are intimately related with the development of social connections Putnam sees as crucial to the creation and maintenance of social capital.

If we believe that race still plays this role in American society, what would our causal story look like in order to explain the declines Putnam reports? One option is to imagine that the end of segregation, and the resulting upheaval, in fact made social capital more difficult to create and maintain within communities. This should not in any way be seen as an argument in support of segregation. What we are saying is that the social, political, legal and economic shifts that came out of the civil rights movement constituted a far more significant challenge to "traditional" American civic life than is generally acknowledged in the social capital literature. Put another way, for the first time in American history, whites were faced with the possibility of living next to, working with and attending school with

people of other races. Studies of hate crimes and evolving white racial attitudes suggest that this represented a significant change in how politics, and American society, were organized, one that caused hostility and feelings of dislocation on the part of whites (Green et al. 1998; Bobo et al. 1997; Sidanius 1993). Conversely, racial communities lost feelings of cohesion as middle class members were able to leave the segregated community and move into the suburbs. We would argue that these changes are an important, and largely ignored, part of the social capital story.

This argument is different from those who critique Putnam for ignoring the role that the 1960s social movements played in changes in social capital. Snyder (2003) for example, argues that social capital decreased as a result of increased attacks on government and government policies from the new right after the 1960s:

(T)he beginning of the rise of the New Right that mobilized in direct opposition to the democratic social movements of the 1960s. In fact a direct correlation exists between the rise of the New Right and the disintegration of social capital...Not only did these conservative forces actively stymie the extension of democracy, but also their rhetoric deliberately and successfully contested the idea of positive government, eroded support for public institutions, and undermined the idea that American citizens owe each other anything at. This strategy served the Right well politically, but it also exacerbated feelings of individualism and disconnection among citizens and consequently played a central role in the destruction of social capital over time (175).

In Snyder's opinion, it is these two clashing forces, the social justice movements and the rise of the New Right, that are to blame for the decline in social capital in the United States. In other words, during a time when the Left became more distrustful of and challenging to the government and sought redress through the expansion of democratic practices, the Right countered these demands with conservative policies and ideologies that effectively removed the idea of a "public good" from America's vocabulary.

We would argue that Snyder is partially right. The political upheaval of the 1960s likely played an important role, but not just because of the role of the New Right, but what was in fact the greater political upheaval was World War II. Up until that point, U.S. national identity had openly been based upon being white and Christian. Eugenics arguments regarding the effects of the "Teutonic gene" on the capacity for democracy were the subject of Congressional speeches and debate. Many prominent Americans, including Henry Ford, initially supported Adolf Hitler's race project. After the war, however, things changed (Klinkner 1999). After fighting fascism it became more difficult to support similar racial projects at home. The political organizing that began in the late 1940s and 1950s were in fact the beginning of what would become the civil rights movement (Takaki 1993). This historical change could be the watershed that explains Putnam's generational story – it may be that Americans born after World War II are less civically involved because World War II marks a significant shift in the definition of what it meant to be an American, and, by extension, part of the American social, economic and political community. For the first time in U.S. history, whiteness was no longer a prerequisite for inclusion in the fabric of American society. That fabric needed to be rewoven, and it remains unclear how those colors will fit together. The resulting ambiguity regarding what constitutes the American community, then, could be an important reason why Putnam finds such a change in the post-World War II generation. For children born after that period, their definition of "peoplehood" could, for the first time, no longer be an openly racial one (Smith 2003).

We believe that an understanding of the racial understanding of American "peoplehood" also provides important insights into American associational membership and collective activity. Social capital theorists like Putnam insufficiently analyze the meaning and motivation behind associational membership. This point is related to the general criticism

that Putnam does not differentiate among organizations (Portes 1998). But, we believe it is more important to consider what collective activity means in the first place, particularly in relation to American civic identity. We mention above the important changes that the social movements of the 1960s brought in terms of the shape and context of American identity. It follows logically that these changes would have had an effect on organizational memberships as well.

We posit that this is because collective activity requires that the participant have some attachment to, or sense of stake in, that collective entity. Within this context, the nature and function of the collective is not an issue. What is an issue is why individuals choose to act in that collective. Mancur Olsen (1971) would argue that collective action is irrational – it is much easier for a person to free ride. But, as Monroe (1998) points out, individuals regularly act altruistically. In addition, social movement theorists have shown the importance of what they call mobilizing (collective) identities to participation in those movements (Polletta and Jasper 2001). This suggests that a purely instrumental view of collective activity provides only part of the picture. The other half is that collective action has two purposes – to work towards some shared objective, and to validate and reinforce the participants' collective identity(ies), however defined (García Bedolla, forthcoming; Masuoka and Scola 2004). So, associational membership is, in and of itself, likely some sort of expression of the participants' collective identities. Given the prominence of race in U.S. history, it is highly likely that racial self-understandings are also an important part of why individuals choose to join organizations, and which organizations they choose to join. This vision of the meaning underlying collective organization is absent from the social capital literature.

## **Toward a Racially Inclusive Theory of Social Capital**

But, we are not arguing that the social capital concept be thrown out completely. Putnam's work, and that of other social capital theorists, has raised important questions about the role of context and community in civic engagement. This work complements and enhances traditional political science studies of political behavior. If the social capital arguments are true, building community-level social capital may be a way for marginalized communities to circumvent the limitations created by socioeconomic status and become more politically engaged. What we are calling for is the development of a social capital framework that takes seriously the ways that race informs all collective social organization in the United States. We believe that such a framework needs to contain three factors: (1) it must incorporate race not as simply an independent variable, but as constitutive of American social and political life; (2) it must take context seriously, both in terms of community history, current racial inequality and opportunities for civic engagement; and (3) it must consider the role gatekeepers play in determining the potential connections people can make. We discuss each in turn.

### *Race as Endogenous Rather than Exogenous*

As we mention above, Smith (2004) points out the limitations of considering race as an independent variable, rather than as an explicitly political creation. The main problem with the independent variable approach is that it makes race exogenous to the model. In other words, whatever movement or change that is caused by the race category occurs outside the model. What is measured inside the model is simply its current effect. Given the ways that race has permeated American social, political, economic and legal institutions, this kind of approach to the study of race is simply insufficient.

An alternative would entail developing a more multi-pronged approach, with the goal of measuring the multiple ways that race affects collective attitudes and activity. The first step would have to be a reorientation of the researcher's interpretational position. In his initial analysis, one of Putnam's anecdotal findings is that African Americans are more likely than Whites to answer the question "Do you believe that most people can be trusted?" in the negative. Putnam interprets this as African Americans having less social trust than whites. Another interpretation is that, since whiteness is the racial "norm" in the United States, an African American read that question as "Do you believe that most *whites* can be trusted?" The good news is that, in Putnam's 2000 social capital benchmark survey, Putnam phrases the question to specifically refer to the racial group in question (i.e., "Do you believe most *Asian* Americans can be trusted?" etc.). He does find some differences in trust by racial group, and still finds that African Americans are less trusting of all racial groups than whites. This highlights why it is important that researchers not uncritically include norms of universal whiteness in their analyses, and that they appreciate that organizational membership and civic engagement are not value neutral exercises. These acts are embedded within a larger sociohistorical context that needs to be taken into account when looking at final outcomes, and arriving at final interpretations.

The second would be to take seriously the long-term impact segregation has had on the development of American communities and social networks. As we mention above, racially, American social networks remain highly homogenous. Martha Menchaca (1995) calls this phenomenon "social apartness" – the tendency for *de facto* segregation to exist even after *de jure* segregation ends. As social scientists, we need to be aware that this homogeneity within social networks can exist within an ostensibly racially integrated setting. Given that Putnam's model of social capital directly relates to feelings of social connectedness,

developing measures that explore racial integration within social networks is important. So too is taking into consideration the role that race plays in levels of social trust, and in how people define the community for which they are choosing to act collectively.

Finally, this framework would need to include a deeper and more multi-faceted measure of collective identity. Social psychologists have been trying to develop such a measure, one that does not focus on personal identity (as current political science does), but rather people's feelings of stigma and attachment to their social group(s) (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992; Polletta and Jasper 2001). One of the main problems with these frameworks is that it would be difficult for them to incorporate an individual's attachment to multiple social groups (i.e., race and gender). Ideally, these indices could be adjusted to take that into account. While these models also suffer from the significant limitation that they end up essentializing what are dynamic and fluid identifications, getting some sense of the role that feelings of "linked fate" have on attitudes and activities, particularly within stigmatized communities, could be an important first step towards developing a better understanding of how race continues to affect American collective activity, even in the post-civil rights era (Dawson 1994). This should also allow us to begin to see how these feelings of stigma and group attachment affect the levels of activity, and kinds of organizations, individuals choose to engage in, thus deepening our understanding of the role that race and social stigma play in social capital development. At the very least, we could do much better than we are at conceptualizing and measuring these kinds of questions.

#### *The Role of Context*

Most work on social capital in marginal communities focuses on the impact that structural factors have on levels of civic engagement. These structural factors affect the way in which racial communities can and do participate in social capital-generating organizations.

We suggest that a neighborhood's racial and economic heterogeneity are key factors for deploying and analyzing social capital in marginal communities.

Recent work by Hero (2003) indicates that racial context is an important factor when measuring levels of social capital. Hero finds a strong relationship among inequality, heterogeneity, and social capital. Studying black and white differences both within states and across states, Hero finds that ratios of civic engagement within states have an inverse relationship with race. He observes that more unequal and racially heterogeneous communities have less social capital, while more homogeneous communities have more. Within states, "civic equality (i.e., the ratio of black to white registration and turnout) is lower in states with high aggregate levels of capital...Social capital is associated with lower, not higher, relative civic equality regarding race" (114). Comparing rates across the states, Hero notes that "(h)igher levels of social capital do not go along with high rates of black voter registration across states...*But social capital is significantly related to white voter registration rates*" (115, italics added). The differences Hero finds between black and white social capital again highlights the importance of race in our understanding of capital. The main point, according to Hero, is that "[s]ocial capital and civic culture are negatively and substantially related to racial and ethnic diversity in the states" (120). So, as we argue, it seems that social capital is easier to develop in racially homogenous communities. Thus, levels of racial homogeneity and inequality need to be part of any social capital model.

In addition, structural factors have been found to have important effects on to resources in particular neighborhood contexts. Portney and Berry (1997) believe "it is clear that a central issue in determining the public's involvement in community life is how the opportunities to participate are structured" (632). For them, "the participation rates of low socioeconomic status (SES) residents in predominantly African American neighborhoods is

almost twice that of low SES residents of low minority population neighborhoods" (637). Conversely, neighborhoods with low minority populations show lower levels of participation in neighborhood associations and lower levels of community.

Similarly, Alex-Assensoh (2002) contends "the idea that social capital and civic engagement are primarily the result of individual factors is belied by mounting and convincing evidence, which shows that structural factors affect engagement in civic and political life" (203). Her study measures the impact that community context has on levels of social capital of both Blacks and whites in five Ohio cities. Focusing on the poverty density and the racial composition of the neighborhoods in question, she finds that "the neighborhood contexts in which black and white inner-city residents live affect their opportunities to join organizations, interact socially, and participate actively in as well as discuss politics" (206). Interestingly, her study found that community meeting attendance was actually *higher* in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty for both Blacks and whites, which suggests "that residence in concentrated poverty neighborhoods can facilitate social capital and civic engagement by spurring citizens to seek political redress for extant inequalities" (215).

So again, structural factors are important, but do not always move social capital levels in the expected direction. A social capital model that took seriously issues of structure and inequality would have to include a variety of contextual issues: racial and economic inequality, poverty rates, homeownership, unemployment, types of employment, level of segregation, among others. It would be especially helpful if such a model could also include some measures of community history, particularly local political organization and/or race relations. While this may seem a tall order, new technologies using geographic mapping programs may make such a construction of the "topography" of social capital possible. At

the very least, the social capital literature on marginal communities makes it clear that structure matters – collective action does not occur in isolation, so we need better ways of measuring that larger context.

*The Role of Gatekeepers*

Chávez and Fraga (2003) point out the important role gatekeepers play in determining who has access to the kinds of organizations that build social capital, in both majority and minority communities. Enhancing Putnam's model, Chavez and Fraga "suggest that the social capital nexus is distinct for communities of color when compared to the general characterization offered by Putnam. When race and ethnicity are taken into account, we argue that the development of social capital requires that the role of *gatekeepers* be specified" (2, italics in original). They describe gatekeepers as follows:

Gatekeepers are comprised of powerholders and their related institutions who largely structure how, for example, frequency of interaction can lead to social trust, how social trust can translate into civic engagement, and especially how civic engagement can translate into social capital (2).

In their study of Latino attorneys in the state of Washington, they discover "that the levels of social trust and civic engagement among Latino attorneys are indeed comparable to those of non-Latino attorneys, and even surpass mainstream societal levels" (3). Compared to other Latinos, the authors discover "levels of civic engagement and trust [that] are far above those of Latinos generally" (3). In addition to levels of social capital, Chavez and Fraga also note that "these Latino professionals engage in civic activities both in their ethnic communities and in their broader communities" (3). This is clearly an advantageous situation for building bridging social capital. However, the authors conclude that "(d)espite all of their resources, these professionals are still vulnerable to decisions made by important gatekeepers" (4).

Much more work needs to be done that employs the concept of gatekeepers. While the term conjures images of an individual, we would suggest, as Chavez and Fraga do, that it represents a structural factor that promotes activity for some and inhibits activity for others. At what points of access are gatekeepers present? How does one's race, gender, or class affect when gatekeeping is instituted? What types of social capital implicate the role of gatekeepers? These are all questions that need to be answered, and incorporated into our overall understanding of social capital.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that social capital has the potential to be a very useful and important concept for deepening our understanding of civic engagement in the United States. But, as it is currently formulated, Putnam's social capital model underemphasizes what the post-World War II generation represents within the context of American history. Since World War II, our nation has moved, for the first time in its history, towards a norm of full social, economic and political inclusion of people of color and women. We argue that this constituted a significant break in American political culture, one that we, as a society, have yet to mend. This break is the result of the difficulty for Americans, particularly white Americans, to define their political community without using the trope of race. As such, we posit that race, and racial identity(ies), are constitutive of the structure and function of social capital in the United States.

This exercise is important because, as we stated in the beginning, few social science theories have garnered the attention, both academic and within the popular consciousness, as has Robert Putnam's theory of social capital. Many large foundations have added social capital and civic engagement programs to their funding priorities. Putnam himself has

received large grants to continue his social capital work. If Putnam is correct and we have a crisis of social capital in the United States, then it is crucial that we accurately identify the causal mechanisms driving that problem. We believe that the current formulation of the problem, and its lack of attention to the central role that race plays in the structure and function of social capital, makes it unlikely that scholars will arrive at the appropriate solution. This would mean a missed opportunity for us all.

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